

An open letter to Google: Stop the censorship of the Internet! Stop the political blacklisting of the World Socialist Web Site!

25 August 2017

Sundar Pichai
Chief Executive Officer
Google, Inc.
Lawrence Page
Chief Executive Officer/Director
Alphabet, Inc.
Sergey Brin
President/Director
Alphabet, Inc.
Eric Schmidt
Executive Chairman of the Board of Directors
Alphabet, Inc.
Gentlemen:

Google's mission statement from the outset was "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." Its official code of conduct was proclaimed in Google's famous motto: "Don't be evil." In recent years, you have seriously lost your way. You are now engaged in hiding the world's information, and, in the process, are doing a great deal of evil.

When Google officially discontinued its China-based search engine, due to censorship by the Chinese government of search engine results for political criticism, Mr. Brin publicly stated that for Google, "it has always been a discussion about how we can best fight for openness on the Internet. We believe that this is the best thing that we can do for preserving the principles of the openness and freedom of information on the Internet."

In 2013, when Mr. Schmidt visited Burma, he spoke in favor of free and open Internet use in the country. In light of Google's recent actions, the statements of Mr. Brin and Mr. Schmidt appear utterly hypocritical.

Google, and by implication, its parent company Alphabet, Inc., are now engaged in political censorship of the Internet. You are doing what you have previously publicly denounced.

Google is manipulating its Internet searches to restrict public awareness of and access to socialist, anti-war and left-wing websites. The *World Socialist Web Site* (www.wsws.org) has been massively targeted and is the most affected by your censorship protocols. Referrals to the WSWS from Google have fallen by nearly 70 percent since April of this year.

Censorship on this scale is political blacklisting. The obvious intent of Google's censorship algorithm is to block news that your company does not want reported and to suppress opinions with which you do not agree. Political blacklisting is not a legitimate exercise of whatever may be Google's prerogatives as a commercial enterprise. It is a gross abuse of monopolistic power. What you are doing is an attack on freedom of speech.

We therefore call upon you and Google to stop blacklisting the WSWS and renounce the censorship of all the left-wing, socialist, anti-war and

progressive websites that have been affected adversely by your new discriminatory search policies.

The WSWS is the online newspaper of the international Trotskyist movement. It is the most widely read socialist publication on the Internet. Since its launch in the year 1998, the WSWS has published more than 60,000 articles on politics, history, science and culture in more than a dozen languages. It is a significant and unique intellectual resource.

WSWS articles are reposted on innumerable websites and are published in printed newspapers all over the world. Material posted by the WSWS is frequently cited in university research papers and included in college syllabi. Leading American scholars, such as historians James McPherson and Allen Guelzo, and Shakespeare expert James Shapiro have granted interviews to the WSWS. The film and theater reviews posted on the site have attracted a large international following. World-renowned filmmakers—Wim Wenders, Mike Leigh, Richard Linklater, Bertrand Tavernier, and Abbas Kiarostami, to name only a few—have discussed their work with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Essays and lectures posted on the WSWS have been included in anthologies produced by publishers with no connection to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The *World Socialist Web Site* also provides coverage of labor struggles and social issues that are either inadequately covered or completely ignored by the corporate-controlled media.

As a result of our principled opposition to war, our focus on social inequality, and our high standards of political and journalistic integrity, the WSWS is indisputably an authoritative publication on world political events, the global economy, international socialism, the history of the twentieth century, the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, and contemporary Marxism. It is a leading international voice in the fight against the resurgence of racism, xenophobia and fascism.

By the beginning of this year, the WSWS had achieved a global Alexa ranking of 36,525, and a ranking of 16,679 in the United States. In the spring, the number of monthly visitors to the WSWS exceeded 900,000. In April 2017, according to our data, 422,460 visits to the WSWS originated from Google searches.

Beginning in April of this year, Google began manipulating search results to channel users away from socialist, left-wing, and anti-war publications, and directing them instead towards mainstream publications that directly express the views of the government and the corporate and media establishment (i.e., the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc.), and a small number of mildly left "trusted" websites whose critiques are deemed innocuous (i.e., *Jacobin Magazine* and the website of the Democratic Socialists of America, which functions as a faction of the Democratic Party).

As a pretext for these actions, Google announced that it was making changes to its search algorithm "to surface more authoritative content," a term that brings to mind efforts by authoritarian regimes to censor the

Internet and, specifically, political views deemed outside the consensus as defined by the establishment media.

Ben Gomes, Google's vice president for search engineering, attempted to justify the imposition of political censorship with a blog post on April 25, claiming that the changes to the algorithm were a response to "the phenomenon of 'fake news,' where content on the web has contributed to the spread of blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information."

Google, according to Gomes, has recruited some 10,000 "evaluators" to judge the "quality" of websites. These evaluators are trained to "flag" websites that are deemed to "include misleading information" and "unsupported conspiracy theories." Gomes explained that the blacklists created by these evaluators will be used, in combination with the latest developments in technology, to develop an algorithm that will impose censorship automatically, in real time, across future search results.

Whatever the technical changes Google has made to the search algorithm, the anti-left bias of the results is undeniable. The most striking outcome of Google's censorship procedures is that users whose search queries indicate an interest in socialism, Marxism or Trotskyism are no longer directed to the *World Socialist Web Site*. Google is "disappearing" the WSWS from the results of search requests. For example, Google searches for "Leon Trotsky" yielded 5,893 impressions (appearances of the WSWS in search results) in May of this year. In July, the same search yielded exactly *zero* impressions for the WSWS, which is the Internet publication of the international movement founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

Other frequently used words and phrases that no longer include the WSWS in Google search results include: *socialism, class struggle, class conflict, socialist movement, social inequality in the world, poverty and social inequality, antiwar literature, and the Russian revolution*. A search for *socialism vs. capitalism*, which, as recently as April, would have listed the *World Socialist Web Site* as the eighth result on the first page of search results, now no longer returns any results at all for the WSWS. **Of the top 150 search queries that returned results for the WSWS in April, 145 now no longer do so.**

All the search terms listed above are employed frequently by users seeking a left-wing, socialist or Marxist take on events. Far from protecting readers from "unexpected" responses to their search requests, Google is manipulating its algorithm to make sure that the left-wing and progressive segment of their users, who would be most interested in the *World Socialist Web Site*, will not find it. Moreover, the extent and precision of the exclusion of the WSWS from search results strongly suggests that the anti-socialist bias of the new algorithm is being supplemented by the actual physical intervention of Google personnel, enforcing authoritarian-style direct and deliberate blacklisting.

As stated above, since April, other left-wing publications that present themselves as progressive, socialist or anti-war also have suffered significant reductions in their Google search results:

- * altnet.org fell by 63 percent
- * globalresearch.ca fell by 62 percent
- * consortiumnews.com fell by 47 percent
- * mediamatters.org fell by 42 percent
- * commondreams.org fell by 37 percent
- * internationalviewpoint.org fell by 36 percent
- * democracynow.org fell by 36 percent
- * wikileaks.org fell by 30 percent
- * truth-out.org fell by 25 percent
- * counterpunch.org fell by 21 percent
- * theintercept.com fell by 19 percent

Google justifies the imposition of political censorship by using a loaded term like "fake news." This term, properly used, signifies the manufacturing of news based on an artificially constructed event that

either never occurred or has been grossly exaggerated. The present-day furor over "fake news" is itself an example of an invented event and artificially constructed narrative. It is a "fake" term that is used to discredit factual information and well-grounded analyses that challenge and discredit government policies and corporate interests. Any invocation of the phrase "fake news," as it pertains to the WSWS, is devoid of any substance or credibility. In fact, our efforts to combat historical falsification have been recognized, including by the scholarly journal *American Historical Review*.

The facts prove that Google is rigging search results to blacklist and censor the WSWS and other left-wing publications. This raises a very serious question, with far-reaching constitutional implications. Is Google coordinating its censorship program with the American government, or sections of its military and intelligence apparatus?

Google probably will dismiss the question as an example of conspiracy theorizing. However, it is legitimate given the ample evidence that Google maintains close ties with the state. In 2016, Barack Obama's defense secretary, Ashton Carter, appointed you, Mr. Schmidt, to chair the Department of Defense Innovation Advisory Board. Earlier this month, Defense Secretary James Mattis visited Google headquarters to discuss the ongoing and close collaboration between the company and the Pentagon. More generally, according to a report in *The Intercept*, Google representatives attended White House meetings on average at least once a week from January 2009 through October 2015.

Google claims to be a private corporation, but it is deeply involved in the formulation and implementation of government policy. The distinction between commercial interests and state objectives is increasingly difficult to detect. By obstructing the free access to and exchange of information, Google's censorship program is aimed at enforcing a twenty-first century version of Orwellian "Right-Think." It is undermining the development of progressive and constitutionally protected political opposition. It is benefiting the proponents of war, inequality, injustice and reaction.

The censorship of left-wing websites, and the WSWS in particular, reflects the fear that a genuine socialist perspective, if allowed a fair hearing, will find a mass audience in the US and internationally. There is widespread popular opposition to your efforts to suppress freedom of speech and thought. That is why Google feels compelled to cloak its anti-democratic policies with misleading arguments and outright lies. An online petition circulated by the WSWS demanding a halt to Google's censorship efforts has already attracted several thousand signatures from readers in 70 different countries on five continents. We are determined to resist Google's efforts to censor our publication, and to continue to raise awareness internationally about Google censorship. As long as this policy continues, Google will pay a heavy price in lost public credibility.

The International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Sites* demands that the anti-democratic changes to the Google search result rankings and its search algorithm since April be reversed, and that Google cease its effort to curtail search accessibility to the WSWS and other left-wing, socialist, anti-war and progressive web publications.

Sincerely,
David North
Chairperson, International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact